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Christopher Dodd. His Father's Son

The Senator From Connecticut,
Living Beyond the Legacy

By Elisabeth Bumiller

CHRISTOPHER J. Dodd is the brash senator from Connecticut who has dated Bianca Jagger, instigated a 4 a.m. doughnut fight, fought with Sen. Jesse Helms—and delivered the Democratic rebuttal to Ronald Reagan's Central America speech, suggesting the president was condoning Salvadoran security guards who, he said, murder people "gangland-style—the victim on bended knee, thumbs wired behind the back, a bullet through the brain." Some in the Connecticut senator's own party were angry he'd done it, saying he'd politicized foreign policy, but his speech made the kind of splash that a young, ambitious senator dreams of—not least because he, like most of them, thinks that someday he might like to be president. Or vice president. Speculation that he could be a running mate in 1984, however improbable, has already started.

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After he called the administration policy a "formula for failure" in his April 27 rebuttal to Reagan's Central American speech, he got 450 calls, 4,000 pieces of mail, high praise—and attacks. No one was lukewarm.

"Demagogic and irresponsible," said U.N. Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick. "The most congested stretch of ignorance and sentimentality ever delivered this side of a junior high school forum," wrote conservative columnist William F. Buckley. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) said it was "terrific" and Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) called it "right on target," but many in Dodd's own party felt he had gone too far. "Florid rhetoric," assessed House Majority Leader James Wright of Texas, who said the speech should never have been given. In 10 minutes on network television, many thought Dodd had managed to make himself as controversial as Reagan.

His liberalism and knowledge of Latin America comes in part from his two years in the Peace Corps. He speaks fluent Spanish, and as he said in his response to Reagan's speech, "I've lived with the people in this region . . . they can't afford to feed their families when they're hungry." But the liberalism is also from his father. Thomas Dodd, best known as a militant anticommunist, was a progressive on social issues.

In a commencement speech several weeks ago to the Hamden Hall Country Day School near New Haven, he evokes the names of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Selma, Ala., the Peace Corps. Then he tells the students about Reagan's "brilliantly conceived" question for the 1980 debate: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" Dodd, dressed in a bright red graduation gown, standing behind a podium in the gym, begins to get worked up. "Are you better off?" he asks, angrily. "Not me, our families, our communities, our country. Just you. It had taken just 20 short years for John Kennedy's challenge to be turned on its head. The challenge of the 1980s had become: What has your country done, for you?" The 18-year-olds listen politely, but it is on the faces of the teachers, many of them the same age as he is, that you can see the memories he evokes.

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